

“Rewarding Spectacle”  
Written by Claire Johnson

As the water bubbled and frothed less than 50 feet in front of us, I heard a NOAA Headquarters representative whisper from over my shoulder “Is it always like this?” I was struck with two conflicting views. Most of us know that the Santa Barbara Channel is teeming with life because of this massive upwelling of nutrients created by mixing cooler waters from the north and warmer waters from the south. This transition zone essentially embodies why the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary was designated in 1980 as a special and unique area for protection, research, and education. Yet, is it always common to find yourself caught amongst the abundant life in action? Although whales can be some of the largest creatures that roam our Earth, they can be quite elusive at times and to witness a spectacle of this degree makes it your lucky day. With many veterans of ocean research and education onboard the dive boat *Truth*, there was not a single ambivalent face, and no one blinked when it wasn’t necessary. What we were experiencing was something that even jaded whale watchers would be enthralled to behold.

People specializing in diverse marine-related fields were brought together to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Great Annual Fish Count with REEF and NOAA. After a fun, action-packed day of seminars, hands-on activities, lectures and live music at Santa Barbara’s beachfront recreational area – Chase Palm Park – all that participated were ready for a day of diving in the splendid, wild ocean out at the Channel Islands. We had done our part to bring the marine environment into the community’s backyard and now it was our turn to venture out into the chilly Californian waters of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary to count fish and experience what we all enjoy most.

Running slightly behind schedule, the vessel *Truth* pulled out of the Santa Barbara harbor and cruised across the reasonably smooth channel towards Santa Cruz Island, where we would be diving Diablo Pinnacle and Painted Cave Annex. It was a relatively uneventful journey out to the islands and ‘June Gloom’ was in full effect, yet undaunted eyes scanned the horizon in hopes of glimpsing the distinctive blow of a blue whale. The Santa Barbara Channel boasts the biggest congregation of the largest animal that has ever lived on Earth – the blue whale. Time was running out, for this was a dive trip and if we didn’t come across anything extremely interesting during the transit, we would proceed to our dive site and swim underwater amongst the replenishing kelp forests to count fish.

Lo and behold, the captain sighted a blow, right off Santa Cruz Island, near our first dive site at Diablo Pinnacle. From the shape of the blow, it was determined that we came across the gentle giant of the sanctuary, a humpback whale. Wait a second another blow, much smaller – it’s a cow/calf pair. Always exciting to see a mother whale and her baby calf, however, at this point we were not yet aware of what was in store for those of us on the *Truth* this particular day.

From a distance, we watched the humpbacks sound and wave at us with their pectoral flippers. Slowly but surely, a few more humpbacks congregated in the area and within a

matter of minutes the ocean was alive with life. Common dolphins swam past the boat at high speed to be a part of the action. Endangered California brown pelicans circled and dove into the churned up water. Sea lions made a mad dash to join in on the feeding frenzy. It had become very clear to all of us that the humpbacks had started to feed with a great display of activity. The mother humpback had left her calf near our boat and it was truly difficult to decide which area to watch. The fish ball of sardines that was being stirred up to the port side or the young calf that was keeping itself occupied by sounding and giving us spectacular views of its tail fluke off the bow. On each attempt, the calf's tail flopped ungracefully to the side — apparently still striving to gain control of its massive appendages. The minute you looked away to witness the rest of the action, the calf performed a full breach drawing all of our attention back. Okay little guy, you are thoroughly entertaining, yet the spectacle 50 feet to the west was the most amazing thing I had seen yet (in person that is).

The humpbacks were displaying textbook behaviors of bubble netting and lunge feeding. The whales were clever enough to use the boat as part of their feeding technique — trapping fish on one side — which put us plum in the middle of the action. The water frothed and bubbled as small fish did their best to escape their destiny of being appetizers for these massive creatures. Whales appeared from the depths within feet from the boat, lunging towards the sky shooting water out through their baleen. This fantastic display of water would give the Bellagio Hotel's fountain show a run for its money! It was hard to focus on any one activity: the dolphins leaped in and out of the action; the pelicans dove in hopes of securing an easy meal; the pinnipeds seemed to need recognition as a charismatic megafauna; and the lone calf did its best to secure our attention through energetic breaches and tail lobs. Those with cameras in hand remained poised and clicked madly away capturing the moment on film as best as they could. Those unfortunate souls without cameras handy – myself included – tried our best to etch out the details of this astounding experience on available memory slates.

Wait, did I mention that the whole reason we were out here in the first place was to count fish? Even though, the lively cetaceans hadn't completed their feeding for the morning, after nearly an hour and a half of observing these gentle creatures stir up life from below, it was indeed our turn to get wet. Hard to imagine that this group of avid divers would be so ho-hum about donning scuba gear, 6.5 mm wet suits and hoods to jump into the waters that many dream of exploring. Yet, after what we were a part of it only made sense. The Great Annual Fish Count dives at Santa Cruz Island's Diablo Pinnacle and Painted Cave Annex were a success with over 20 species positively identified at each site. Species ranged from bright red-lipped treefish tucked under ledges and vivid orange garibaldi protecting their territory to small black-eyed gobies peering from the rocks and graceful bat rays swimming through the kelp canopy.

Many can say that they were fortunate enough to observe the amazing winged creatures of the deep performing acrobatic feats – such as breaching – that mesmerize most. However, how many have been present when the humpbacks lunge out of the ocean depths with their pink pleats fully expanded, streaming water through their baleen,

feeding on the schooling sardines or other small fish? It was a sight that even a weathered, sea-faring captain would proclaim gratitude for experiencing.

Now I come full circle to the question of whether or not it is always like this. In my experience, you can spend hours and days out at sea and be convinced that little life exists where the air meets the waves. Then when you are amidst the web of life in action like we were on June 30, 2002, I'm convinced even the most disgruntled oil and gas exploitation advocate would consider a change of heart. An experience like this can realign what is important in life and how significant our impact on the natural environment is. If I had it my way, everyone would witness something as magical as this and make up their minds to do everything within their power to guarantee that their grandchildren and future generations would have the opportunity to see a spectacle of the natural environment this rewarding!